



Science, Myth and History: Tracing the Hindu Nationalist Discourse on Aryan Invasion Theory and its Discursive Shift with the Re-discovery of Saraswati

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Abstract

The inherent ambiguity and uncertainty surrounding the origin of the Aryans have engaged scholars for a long time. Rooted in philology, the 19th-century Aryan invasion theory (AIT) was challenged by the emerging scientific disciplines of archaeology, hydrology, paleontology, and genetics, which created an avenue for alternative historiography, where *Hindutva* locates itself. This paper traces the evolving Hindu nationalist engagement with the AIT and argues that the re-discovery of the Saraswati in the 1980s marked a shift in the Hindu nationalist response to the Aryan question as they adopted the language of science to challenge AIT/AMT and to advocate for the indigenous origins of the Indo-Aryans. The study outlines the colonial Hindu response to the philological construction of AIT and its implications for the Indian nation. It then analyses the arguments of neo-Hindu nationalist works from 1980 to 2019 and examines their scientific and historical positioning as they engage with evolving scientific research on the Saraswati River. In the end, the debate over the interpretation of evidence and ideological bias is evaluated to advocate for objectivity in adopting scientific research in interdisciplinary fields, fostering a constructive debate amid increasingly polemical discussion.



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Introduction

The study of India's past finds its beginning in colonial Indology, which was guided by concerns of Orientalism and Imperialism. Either by acceptance or rejection, the Indian response has been shaped in reaction to Oriental studies (Thapar, 1978; Gupta, 1999), due to which it resists 'positive participation' (Chakrabarti, 2000). State modernity is also deeply tied to the colonial framework, which further impacts appropriation of colonial knowledge (Hutton, 2025, p.10). The Aryan Invasion Theory (AIT), now modified as the Aryan Migration Theory (AMT), is one such legacy that serves as a case study on how colonial scholarship played a role in the formation of contesting post-colonial nationalisms in India.

Philological constructions and archaeological challenge

In his famous lecture delivered to the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1786, William Jones, for the first time, suggested a common linguistic origin of Sanskrit and Western languages, based on their similarity, which had already been noted in earlier European records. This group of languages that came to be known as 'Indo-European' or 'Indo-Germanic' laid the foundation of comparative philology. The Asiatic Society of Calcutta, established by William Jones in 1784, undertook the project of codification of Hindu and Muslim laws, which legitimized the position of comparative philology. Jones's theory of philological resemblance of Indian and European languages was co-opted by Friedrich Schlegel for the propagation of a romantic nationalism, which associated the idea of identity and marked the beginning of the ideological appropriation of the Aryan theory. Germans fixated on philology as the major interpretative approach to the study of Indology to compete with the British, who had much better access to Indian studies because of their proximity, which in turn limited Indology to textual studies (Adluri, 2011). By appropriating the idea of Aryan people for the elevation of the Germans, Schlegel "altered Aryan from a translation of *Aryan* into a modern racial category, which immediately captured the imagination of his contemporaries" (Zia-Ebrahimi, 2011, p. 448). Max Müller, whose politicization of the AIT contributed to the development of majoritarian identity discourse in India and Germany (Roy, 2016). Müller's use of the word 'race' to denote Aryans gave rise to the theory of the Indo-European or Aryans as a racial category. Conjectures on the original home of the Aryans in comparative philology laid the foundation of identitarian politics that came to be associated with the AIT.

By the 19th century, the term ‘Aryans’ had accumulated a certain corpus of ideas which associated it with intellectual superiority, high character, progressive development, and world domination, and Sanskrit literature came to be identified with a superior cultural world view as India was deemed the ‘cradle of civilization’. Nevertheless, as discussions on the Vedas began to be centered around race and ethnicity, Aryans became a part of European re-appropriation, which detached them from any Indian claim (Figueira, 2002, p. 48). By the late 19th century, the possibility of an Asian homeland was rejected, and several theories on the European origins of Aryans were floated. The British evaded the responsibility of implied equality with colonial Indian subjects by theorizing a European original homeland of the Aryans (Leopold, 1974).

The discovery of the Harappan civilization in the 1920s by the Archaeological Survey of India challenged the Aryan worldview as it was clearly advanced and pre-Aryan. The decline of the Indus Valley civilization (IVC) was then linked with the Aryan invasion. By shifting the chronology of IVC, Mortimer Wheeler, then Director-General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), blamed the annihilation of the Indus cities on Indra and his Aryan hordes. This argument was later withdrawn by Wheeler himself, but Wheeler’s theory, rooted in ‘colonial framework of oriental despotism and racial conflicts’ (Kumar, 2020, p.6), had already made inroads in Indian historiography. It was also challenged by archaeologists as “evidence pointed rather to the opposite conclusion—that a considerable time elapsed between the end of the Indus culture and the Aryan occupation” (Basham, 1949, p. 141), and later researchers dismissed Wheeler’s theory to explore other natural causes to determine the decline of the IVC.

Hindu nationalism and the Aryans

The Hindu nationalist engagement with the AIT developed as a critique of philology and colonialism, allowing them to contest European appropriation of the Aryan legacy. These writings are also a challenge to the implied racial, linguistic, and caste divisions of the AIT. Ideological and political constraints guided the appropriation of AIT in Indian politics.

Koenraad Elst (1999) identifies Jyotirao Phule as the first person to make political use of the AIT in India. Phule (1853) employed the AIT to claim indigeneity for lower castes who had been subjugated by the Brahmin invaders. Phule sought to provide an ethnic and racial basis for the unity of the masses, although it excluded Brahminism (Begari, 2010). In contrast, Swami Vivekananda (2006) questioned the philological construction of AIT and alleged that it is replicating the slavery paradigm of the United States in India. He argues that there is no known

scriptural reference to the migration of the Aryans to India, rejecting the premise of AIT and its implications of the North-South and caste divide.

Sri Aurobindo (1914/1971) also rejected the AIT as a philological myth based on mistranslations of the Vedas and stood for 'a unity of physical and cultural type, throughout India' (p. 37). He observed that the metaphorical descriptions of virtues have been construed as racial references by translators. He criticised the equivalence of language and race in philology, questioning its scientific foundations:

Common origin of language or even common language does not prove common ethnic origin... Philology is, in fact not yet a science, but rather far too largely a structure of ingenuities and plausible conjectures. It set out with the hope of discovering the origin of language and the scientific laws of its development, but it has failed entirely. (Sri Aurobindo, 2003, p. 611)

Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1925) located the original home of the Indo-Aryans in the Arctic based on the evidence of longer days and nights in the Rigveda. He argues against philology and stresses the difficulty of translation of the Vedas due to their remote antiquity and loss of semantic transparency. Philological results, Tilak observes, should be backed by other sciences like geology, archaeology, paleology, and mythology. He uses astronomical dating to establish the antiquity of the Vedas to fulfil his aims of Hindu renaissance and revival. Tilak's position shows aggressive nationalism as he traced the Aryan home to the Arctic, expanding India's potential territory (Sharma, 1995).

Unlike other Hindu leaders, V.D. Savarkar, the founder of *Hindutva*, accepted the AIT and did not engage with the scholarly debate at all. He rather tried to accommodate his political views within the existing oriental research. To achieve his aims, Savarkar (1923/1969) culturally differentiated the Aryans who travelled to India from their Persian kins. He argues that the Aryans who entered India were developing a distinct nationality by adopting a shared identity which was tied to the local landscape, the 'Sapta-Sindhu'. The indigeneity of the Aryans was not important to the imperatives of *Hindutva* if a sense of belonging of the Aryans with the Indian *Holyland* could be constructed. For Savarkar, all the ancient races of India melded into one Hindu race with inter-caste marriages, and hence the previous racial categories, including the Aryans, are no longer discernible. The cultural and biological synthesis of all people of India, as formulated by Savarkar, thereby allows him to reject the divisiveness of the Indian nation embedded within

the AIT. Savarkar's position on incoming Aryans is similar to that of Nehru, who rejected a war-like invasion in favour of cultural synthesis of the Aryans and the Dravidians (Kaiwar, 2003), but with a fundamental difference in vision of nationhood, where Savarkar stands for an unchanging Indian nationhood and Nehru for a constructivist view of nation.

M.S. Golwalkar (1947), the second sarsanghchalak of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), contests the validity of the 'shady' Western histories that are shaped by the superiority of race. He positions Indian civilization as a 'progressive and highly civilized nation' of Aryan descent (p.42). Golwalkar is cognizant of the complexity of the Aryan debate, which could be employed to the advantage of the British to justify foreign rule. Rejecting the idea of invasion, he writes:

By showing that the Hindus are mere upstarts and squatters on the land (as they themselves are in America, Australia and other places!), they can set up their own claim. For then neither the Hindus nor the Europeans are indigenous and as to who should possess this land, becomes merely a matter of superior might, mere priority of trespass giving no better right to any race to rule undisturbed on any part of the globe. (Golwalkar, 1947, p.43)

Golwalkar, however, clusters all hypotheses on the Aryan theory as conjectural; only the hypothesis of the indigenous origin of Hindus is acceptable; he (1947) writes:

Man's knowledge of those times is merely conjectural. He puts forth hypotheses, which are merely of tentative value. Hypothesis is not truth. Out of the heap of hypotheses, we reject all and positively maintain that we Hindus came into this land from nowhere, but are indigenous children of the soil always, from times immemorial and are natural masters of the country. (p.46)

For Golwalkar (1966), AIT is an exercise in systematic indoctrination of the Hindus by using oriental historiography, shaped by the concerns of imperialism, to break the national spirit of the Indian people.

Saraswati and the discursive shift in the *Hindutva* historiography

K.D. Sethna (1980/1992) is a precursor to the subsequent writings on Saraswati and AIT, as he linked the fortified pre-Harappan archaeological findings at Kalibangan and Kot Dijito to the

Vedic civilization. Sethna strengthens his pre-Harappan Aryan hypothesis by linking these settlements to the Rigvedic Saraswati valley. However, the Saraswati was majorly incorporated in the Hindu nationalist discourse with the LANDSAT imaging of dry channels in the north-west in the 1980s, which were used to construct the path of the mythical Saraswati.

The Akhil Bharatiya Itihasa Sankalana Yojana (ABISY), founded around 1978-79 by RSS pracharak Moropant Pingley, categorically ties its research on the AIT with palaeontological research on Saraswati and argues for a later dating of the Rigveda and renaming of the Harappan civilisation as 'Indus-Saraswati Civilisation'. Archaeologist V.S.Wakankar was part of a multidisciplinary research campaign by ABISY on the Saraswati paleochannels in Haryana, aiming at the correction of the colonial version of history. Wakankar (1987) states that the pre-Harappan (now known as early Harappan) agricultural sites in the districts of present-day Punjab and Haryana are indigenous, as there is no sign of external immigration. He writes that the Vedic culture developed on the banks of the river Saraswati with Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who evolved into the agricultural communities of the Vedic period. Arguing for a greater antiquity of the Vedas, he interprets the story of 'Vratrasur' in the Rigveda and Puranas as symbolic writing of climatic changes in the upper Paleolithic Ice Age. He relates the end of the Harappan civilisation with the desiccation of the Saraswati due to tectonic shifts and a change of course. He observes that the AIT is an imperial agenda to divide the Indian people into Aryans, Dravidians, and Adivasis, when archaeological proof shows continuity of civilisation.

David Frawley (1991) considers the Saraswati river as one of greater significance, when compared to the Indus, based on the evidence of a number of hymns in the Rigveda, and identifies the Ghaggar river with the Rigvedic Saraswati based on 'Nadistutisukta', the 75th hymn of the Rigveda. Along with the evidence of the fire altars, the Indus Valley civilization is deemed post-Vedic, as Frawley argues that the end of both, with the desiccation of Saraswati, ties them together. Based on the description of the Saraswati in the Rigveda and archaeological findings along the Ghaggar-Hakra channels, N.S Rajaram(1993-1994) proposes that the Saraswati river mentioned in the Rigveda is a part of IVC and hence, IVC is Vedic-Aryan and the Rigveda is pre-Harappan. NS Rajaram (1993-1994) uses the Ghaggar-Hakra dating to point out the disruption it causes in the existing chronology of the Aryans:

Rig Veda may or may not say, it most emphatically describes North India as it was before the Saraswati dried up...This immediately leads us to a couple of anomalous situations to say the least. First, if the Aryans came into India only about 1500 BC and composed the

Rig Veda around 1200 BC, how did they describe a river and geography as it was before 1900 BC? Even more puzzling, why did they cross six great rivers—the Indus and its five tributaries— only to set up a great civilization, and worship it as the holiest of rivers? The verdict of archaeology, therefore, is clear and unambiguous: the Rig Veda describes North India as it was before the decline of the Harappan culture. Therefore, the Harappan society was Vedic Aryan. And the Aryan Dravidian divide is modern day fiction....High Harappan culture—c. 3000 to 1900 BC—is post-Rig Vedic, in a manner to be made specific. (p. 4-5)

Rajaram and Frawley (1997) call for a scientifically validated timeline of ancient Indian history based on the Saraswati framework, as they link the end of the Vedic period with the terminating point of Saraswati.

These conclusions were then rejected by scholars, as it was argued that satellite photography cannot prove the chronology or historical details of the desiccation of the river Saraswati as proposed by Frawley and Rajaram (Mukherjee, 1997-1998, Witzel, 2001). Geological studies, however, continue to guide speculative reinterpretations of Sanskrit texts to arrive at estimates of the drying of the Saraswati, combined with the importance of the Saraswati in Rigvedic hymns establish Saraswati as the focal point of Indus-Valley civilization (Feuerstein, Kak, & Frawley, 1995). The chronology of the Rigvedic books is also disputed to conclude that the Rigvedic hymns precede the desiccation of Saraswati and abandonment of the Harappan sites.

Koenraad Elst (1999) anticipates the impact of the evidence of Saraswati as it seeks to challenge the complete chronology of the Vedic texts, including the Sutras. Pushing the chronology of the Vedic Aryans, he speculates that the Kassite and Mittani people, identified as Indo-Aryans, could have migrated from the Sapta-Sindhu due to the desiccation of the Saraswati river around 2000 B.C., which would explain their ‘sudden appearance’. In Hindu nationalist writings, the re-discovery of Saraswati signifies the end of the ‘linguistic tyranny’ of AIT:

Who will believe that the Aryans crossed up to six great rivers - the Indus and the Sutlej with its tributaries —only to settle down on the banks of a river that had gone dry five hundred years earlier, and went on to worship it as “best of mothers, best of rivers, best of goddesses”. (Rig-Veda, II.41.16)? It is clear that the Vedic people who sang hymns in

praise of the Saraswati lived along its banks while it was in full flow. (Danino & Nahar, 1996, p.75-76)

In the works of Talageri (1993, 2000), Saraswati presents as a boundary used to mark the north-western expansion of the Vedic Aryans based on the Rigvedic evidence and chronology. On the basis of his proposed Rigvedic chronology, he argues that the Indus was not known to the early Aryans during the composition of the earliest hymns. He writes that it is only after the expansion of the Vedic people towards the Indus valley that it became an important part of the Rigvedic hymns. In his analysis, the IVC becomes a joint civilisation of two groups of Aryans, the Anus and the Purus. For an early dating of the Rigveda, Talageri cites GurdipSingh's 1971 report on aridity in the north-western region around 1800 BC (corrected to ~2100 BC) to conclude the drying of the Saraswati in the same period. Talageri's hypothesis of expanding geography of the Vedic Aryans towards the northwest from the banks of the Saraswati is also used to support the migration of Indo-Aryans from India.

Archaeologist B.B. Lal (2009) drew upon the Rigveda to construct the image of the Saraswati as a river that flowed from the mountains to the sea between the Yamuna and the Sutlej, which conflicts with its identification with rivers in Afghanistan and validates the identification of the Saraswati with the Ghaggar-Hakra. He corroborates his research with geological research on tectonic movements causing diversion of waters of the Saraswati. Lal also co-relates the dating of the abandonment of Kalibangan with the drying of the Saraswati, i.e., 1900 B.C. He maps the area of the Vedic civilization based on the flora and fauna, which matches the spread of the IVC, arguing for a Vedic-Harappan continuity. The chronology of Saraswati demands a high chronology for the Rigveda, which, according to Lal, cannot be later than 2000 B.C., making it contemporaneous to the Harappan civilisation. He, however, refrains from a final conclusion as the Indus script remains undeciphered. He also proposes cultural continuity between the archaeological artifacts of the Indus-Saraswati civilization and present Hindu society, an approach criticised as unhistorical.

In 2010, Danino tried to reconcile the opposing scientific studies on hydrology and climatic conditions in the north-western region with the archaeological evidence to arrive at the conclusion that the Harappans enjoyed a wetter climate, which moved towards aridity and drought around 2200 B.C. He traces the phases of the Saraswati River based on recent scientific studies but stresses the importance of future multidisciplinary research. Denino also challenges

the 2019 genetic research by Reich et al. in favour of AMT due to restricted population samples and circular arguments.

G.D. Bakshi (2019) called for a new paradigm shift in the study of the Indian past based on 'new evidence' of the 'historicity of the river Saraswati'. Although Bakshi places his text against racist colonial knowledge, he himself racializes the origin of the Indian civilization by equating Brahmins with Aryans (Kumar, 2022). Bakshi creates a datable timeline of desiccation of the Saraswati by selectively citing data supporting his co-relation of Saraswati with the Harappan, while ignoring the directly contradicting research. He repeatedly states that the Aryans could not have moved into a dry NW area, which was already showing migration by the natives. However, the northwestern people could have moved east and west in search of fertile land, an argument that cannot be called evidentiary. Bakshi also selectively engages with genetic data; for instance, he claims that no migrations have taken place in the last 12000 years, as Mt DNA does not show any variation. But Mt DNA does not reveal paternal DNA, which is important as genetic influx from Central Asia was male-driven due to the patriarchal structure of early Aryans (Silva et al., 2017).

Historiographical Analysis

The nationalist identification of the modern Ghaggar-Hakra is rooted in colonial research in historiography and cartography, which provide neutrality and legitimacy to their readings. Even the chronology of the composition of the Rigveda is suggested by M. Viven de Saint-Martin, who interpreted that the composition of 'Nadi-Sukta' must have happened after the arrival of the Aryans to the Saraswati valley (Chadha, 2011). The Harappan-Saraswati linkage, as proposed by anti-AIT research, is disputed as historians contest the identification of these sites as Harappan. It is argued that many of the sites prove Harappan contact only, with a distinctive local culture (Ratnagar, 2001; Thapar, 2002). There is 'hardly any correspondence' between the Vedic literature and the excavated Harappan sites, writes Ratnagar (2001, p. 7). The Hindu nationalist writings focus more on criticism of the AIT but do not largely engage with the arguments in AMT research, while rejecting both.

The approach of current research, which has sought to identify a discovered river bed with Saraswati without first critically examining the known location of Saraswati from the Rigveda, is also criticized (Aklujkar, 2014). There have been speculations of the identification of Rigvedic Saraswati with the Helmand of Afghanistan by scholars, contesting the identification of

Ghaggar-Hakra with Saraswati. Despite many objections, the paleochannels in the north-western region have been widely examined to map the Saraswati and the dating of Harappa. It is difficult to reach a consensus, as scientific studies also differ in their findings. Clift et al. (2012) showed that the Yamuna and Sutlej deviated 20,000 years ago and 10,000 years ago, respectively, which makes it unlikely that the river channel contributed to the migration of the Harappans. Valdiya (2017) contends that the Saraswati was a perennial river until tectonic activities caused the deviation of the Tons River to join the Yamuna in 1750 BC. Chatterjee, Ray et al. (2019) show that the Ghaggar was perennial during 78,000-18,000 BC and 7,000-2,500 BC as it was receiving sediments from the Himalayas. Major river channels of the Saraswati had disappeared by 6000 B.C., while the Ghaggar survived as a monsoon-fed river network (Sinha, 2020).

Concluding remarks

The association of the post-colonial response with Hindu nationalist concerns has resulted in an ‘increasingly political, emotional, polemical, and strident’ debate, while exchange between scholars of South Asia has become impossible as researchers are stereotyped as “Hindu nationalist,” “western neo-colonialist,” or “Marxist secularist” (Bryant, 2005, p. 470). The anti-AIT writers have mostly remained marginalised, as it is argued that they do not engage with Western scholarship in terms of professional debate. Despite controversy, the Saraswati discourse has future implications for the Aryan theory and Indian history. Motives and ideologies notwithstanding, one must focus on the evidence and its interpretation to arrive at a consensus (Hock, 2005). The scientific research on Saraswati discourse offers scope to develop a scholarly consensus via transparency and verifiable evidence in the future. Substantiated by archaeological confirmation, especially in the cases of Bhawalpur and Kalibangan, as evidenced by archaeological studies in India and Pakistan, the geological and hydrological research in the north-west is likely to become increasingly significant in the coming years with respect to the Harappan civilization and, consequently, the question of the Aryans in India.

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